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ABSTRACT

Six attributes of the successful music teacher are identified on the basis of research and personal experience. These are enthusiasm; warmth and personal interest; a rehearsal technique combining clarity, brevity, fast pace, and variety; a balance of praise and meaningful criticism; a discipline technique focusing on communication; and the desire to improve and learn. By adopting these characteristics, music teachers will not only increase their own professional skill, but also improve the musical learning of their students. (LP)

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Characteristics of Effective Music Teachers

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Characteristics of Effective Music Teachers

What special qualities does an effective music teacher possess? What are the characteristics which differentiate the highly effective from the ineffective ensemble director or general music teacher? Addressing these questions are important because by identifying and then adopting the professional attributes of the highly successful music teacher, we will not only become more skillful in our profession, but consequently improve the musical learning of our students.

What does it take to be an effective music teacher? Musicianship, of course, is considered an essential quality. We all know teachers, however, that are highly musical and possess great skill on an instrument, but are not particularly effective as music teachers. Consequently, it takes more than personal musicianship and performance skills to be highly effective. Some feel that a music teacher's competency can best be determined by simply listening to his or her band at contest or in concert. Granted, performance quality is an important measure of the teacher's abilities. However, what the music teacher does in the rehearsal is more of a determinant of effectiveness than a cursory listening to a single performance.

Thus, in addition to the teacher's musicianship and the performance quality of the group, what other qualities do highly effective music teachers possess? The six attributes presented in this article are based both on personal observations and experiences as well as available research in music teaching.

Enthusiasm

Highly effective music teachers are enthusiastic about teaching and about the students. They even share a sense of excitement when their students learn to play an instrument. One study, which asked students to evaluate their music teachers, confirms the importance of enthusiasm. Music teachers considered "best" by their students were characterized as being "enthusiastic about music" and "enthusiastic about teaching."[1]

Being enthusiastic means demonstrating an enjoyment of and an interest in the students and the music. Additionally, it involves a sense of forward momentum in the rehearsal and a willingness to provide positive reinforcement when deserved. The enthusiastic teacher projects a sense of eagerness and optimism in working with students. "We almost have it, try it once more at C," can reflect this sense of optimism in contrast to "again at letter C."

For some teachers, demonstrating enthusiasm, particularly after years or even decades of teaching, can be difficult. If we are, however, to be fully effective, enthusiasm is essential.

Warmth

Warmth can be defined by the amount of help, concern, and interest the teacher directs toward the students. Music teachers who take a personal interest in their students, such as simply calling them by name, are usually more effective. Research even shows that so called "high-warmth" teachers not only serve as models of good behavior which are emulated by students, but students tend to learn more from such teachers.[2]

Many teachers may be concerned that students will perceive a "warm" teacher as a weak teacher and thus the target of student behavior problems. Clearly, a "warm" teacher can also be a strict disciplinarian. In fact, showing an interest in and support of the students actually enhance a teacher's rapport with a performing group, thus improving group behavior. Being a "warm" teacher, however, does not mean attempting to act as a personal counselor to every student or becoming unprofessionally close. It does mean that the teacher is well liked and respected as

a musical and educational leader because of knowledge, interest in, and fair treatment of young people.

Rehearsal Techniques

Probably the first few indicators of superior rehearsal techniques are clarity and brevity of instructions and directions. When Richard Papke analyzed video tapes of instrumental directors' rehearsal techniques for his doctoral dissertation, he found that directors, in general, were overly repetitive when giving directions.[3] For example, a band director recently made the following comments, "we need to work on dynamics--look at measure 7, trumpets. Listen for balance. The dynamics aren't quite right. Play it softer from measures 2 through 9. Let's really watch our dynamics." In this case the director repeated himself five times resulting in obscuring his point, loss of student attention, and just plain inefficient rehearsal techniques. This teacher could have quickly gotten his point across with seven words: "Trumpets, play measures 2 through 9 softer."

Effective rehearsals are fast paced. There is a sense of forward momentum--the players know progress is being made. The teacher keeps a reasonable balance between two goals: (1) keeping everyone involved and playing, and (2) the need to

"wood-shed" the parts by hearing individuals and sections. If there is an exclusive emphasis on group playing, there will be insufficient musical progress; contrastingly, over emphasis on individual and sectional work results in boredom and possible misbehavior. The highly effective music teacher is able to balance these two goals.

Being aware of the attention spans of students is also important. When possible, the highly effective teacher changes pieces just before students become disinterested and in addition, uses a variety of music in programming the rehearsal. This variety can be attained by selecting pieces of different musical styles, levels of difficulty, and length.

Finally, the good rehearsal is generally business-like--it is approached with a sense of seriousness. Highly effective directors are organized, follow rehearsal routines, and provide a sense of orderliness. A list of the rehearsal order, placed on the board prior to the start of rehearsal, not only reflects this sense of seriousness and planning, but communicates what needs to be accomplished.

In summary, rehearsals can be productive and more enjoyable by providing clear and brief rehearsal suggestions, a sense of forward momentum by keeping the rehearsal fast paced, variety in music selection, and a planned business-like environment.

Praise and Criticism

Our approach to students can be viewed on a continuum ranging from praise to criticism. It is clear that a consistent use of criticism to the point of berating students not only results in low ensemble morale, but may even be injurious to the individual's mental health.

Music teachers, in general, believe in praise but in practice tend to use criticism more often. It is easy to criticize, but when trying to praise we often feel clumsy and end up doing the opposite. How many times have we said to a student, "well that was pretty good" or "if you work on your tone and tonguing you might improve"? It is important to remember that achievement without recognition is relatively unsatisfying.[4]

Highly effective teachers know how to use praise or positive reinforcements to motivate and reward students. They are equally adept at providing criticisms to correct musical errors and misbehaviors.

Meaningful criticism is essential for musical growth. The highly effective teacher, however, can deliver such criticism in a spirit of helpfulness and even encouragement. Such comments as "your intonation is better, not let's work on the dynamics" or "watch my beat then we'll all stay together," provide criticism but

are still encouraging. Most importantly, they indirectly tell students that success is near. In contrast, such comments as "you people never listen" or "why can't you watch me?" are not just critical, but actually discouraging. The ineffective teacher does not realize when criticism begins to be perceived as verbal abuse which results in frustration and discouragement for both students and teacher.

In addition to knowing how to praise and criticize, the highly effective music teacher attempts to provide such praise and criticism somewhere near a 50:50 ratio. These teachers know that spoken and unspoken praise (facial expressions) along with honest criticism delivered tactfully enable students to achieve their musical potential while enjoying performing in the school ensemble.

Discipline

Highly effective teachers have no secret magic formula for preventing and handling behavior problems. Only through hard work and trial and error--in other words the "hard way"--have they learned techniques which for them results in well behaved ensembles. To further complicate matters, those classroom and rehearsal management techniques that work for one teacher in one school or class may not work with a different group of students. Discipline is indeed both an art and a

science. Finally, we all know how much discipline, administrative support, and student attitudes differ from one school to another even within a single school district.

Although there is no elixir for dealing with behavior problems, we do know that the highly effective teacher puts the emphasis on prevention; it is the ineffective teacher who is consistently reacting to problems. One of the techniques used to prevent behavior problems is the ability to communicate one's expectations. The highly effective teacher has a few clearly defined rules like, "everyone in their seats ready to play at 9:45" or "no talking while the director is on the podium," that all the students understand. Additionally, the highly effective music teacher reminds the students of how they should behave before a problem situation occurs. For example, before spending 10 minutes working with one section of the band, one director states, "we need to work with the clarinets and flutes, everyone else remain quiet." It doesn't matter if the students are supposed to know to keep quiet; they need to be reminded. This way of stating behavioral expectations before a problem occurs is characteristic of the highly effective teacher.

Being what Jacob Kounin calls, "withit" is also important. Simply put, the "withit" teacher knows what goes on in the rehearsal. He or she, for instance, is

sometimes even accused of having "eyes in the back of the head" by students who cannot figure out how the teacher simultaneously prevents a tuba player from shooting a rubber band while explaining a new rhythm written on the board.[5]

The "withit" music teacher catches the minor behavior problem before it becomes major; he or she can even handle a behavior problem without letting it interrupt the instructional flow. For example, the teacher might tell the trumpets to use the third-valve slide while at the same time remind the saxes to stop talking. Thus, a minor behavior problem is corrected without loss of rehearsal time and the teacher's energy.

Effective use of eye contact is still another rehearsal control technique. To avoid interrupting the rehearsal many successful teachers use eye contact, a nod of the head, or a firm stare to put a stop to minor behavior problems. There is no need to stop the entire group for every problem.

Some behavior problems, of course, call for more direct action. In these cases, a quiet reprimand, audible only to the misbehaving student, is frequently more effective than yelling. The quiet reprimand is less likely to trigger an emotional response on the part of the student, and secondly, it does not call the attention of the entire group to the misbehavior.[6]

Thus, the highly effective teacher places the emphasis on preventing behavior problems by communicating behavioral expectations and being "withit." When problems do occur there is an attempt to deal with the student, without interrupting the rehearsal. Such techniques as eye control, correcting misbehavior while simultaneously continuing to rehearse, and use of quiet reprimands are successful for many music teachers.

Desire to Improve and Learn

Highly effective teachers share a common characteristic: a desire to improve and learn. They constantly strive for a better sound, more accurate intonation, improved instrumentation, in short, a better group. Above all, highly effective teachers are eager to improve their own personal teaching and conducting effectiveness. They make an extra effort to attend conventions, clinics and university courses, and they invite guest clinicians. Additionally, these teachers are analytical--they search for a better way to approach a composition, seek ways to improve teacher-student relationships, and are determined to not only enhance the quality of the ensemble but ensure higher levels of personal competence. In essence, they are not easily satisfied.

Enthusiasm, warmth, efficient rehearsal techniques, use of praise, skill in disciplining, and finally, desire to improve, all represent six ways of becoming a more effective music teacher. May our search be fruitful.

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